Roller

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> "I am reading your Black Book with great interest. All those decades—all those traces—all those places—all those Chirico arcades we flit through or stand in, watching the rain, lighting a cigarillo—and we won't even know whether it's a B film or not!"
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> [Edwin Morgan, letter to Roy Fisher, May Day, 2000]

Roller was a very long running project using a text Roy Fisher had offered to Ian Tyson in 1979. The text was supposed to be included in what Tyson described in the request letter to Fisher (dated 1st March, 1979) as a 'one-off magazine/anthology', planned as a letterpress edition of 150-200 copies. Tyson goes on:

> It would have a decidedly non objective slant and I wondered if you would have something for it (for instance pieces like "Cultures" would be an ideal example ie with emphasis on the typographic quality) say about four pages. Other people might be Asa Benveniste, Alan Reynolds, Kevin Power, Peter Cunliffe (a friend who teaches at St Martins and does very interesting system pieces) a 3D page by a sculptor called Richard Wilson to a text of Simon Cutts and perhaps Brian Marley. It will be entirely English and hopefully look as if it has something to do with 1979 rather than the music hall and the title —"Smokeless Zone". The deal would be copies for all and non-profit making. . . .

When he received the text of 'Roller' from Fisher, Tyson sent a couple more enthusiastic letters, one in which he confessed he didn't understand

all of it, and another (29th November 1979) which repeated the pledge made at the outset:

> Yes I need to talk about Roller in the not <u>too</u> distant future as I would like to put it into a four part mag I am planning being you, me, Asa Benveniste, and another painter called Peter Cunliffe all under the grand title of Smokeless Zone (think I mentioned this before). In order to be able to afford to do it I will have to print at Norwich so must get it under way a.s.a.p.

The Wilson reference and the allusion to Cunliffe's 'system pieces' may have prompted Fisher to produce a quasi-machinic text systematised according to grid, responding to Tyson's own affection for the numbers game of grids in his book projects. In particular, there is Tyson's suggestion that he write fragment-text 'pieces' resembling those arranged as text-objects on the circles of the Tetrad Press collaboration, *Cultures*. *Cultures* had been what Tyson liked to call a 'typographic' project, and Fisher does include in *Cultures* a reference to the printing process, the phrase recorded on the third circle: 'a moment | printed is | enlarged | infinitely'.[1] The title 'Roller' must refer to the roller of the printing press, the same roller that Fisher would imagine at work printing out the streets of Birmingham in the 1986 *A Furnace*:

> then suddenly printed across with
> this century, new, a single
> passage of the roller
> dealing out streets of terraces
> that map like ratchet-strips[2]

The poem offered to Tyson in 1979 has already imagined that urban-historical roller as analogous to his own creative memories of Birmingham

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[1] https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/fisher-cultures-collaboration-with-ian-tyson-65302/4

[2] 'The Return' section of *A Furnace*, *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1955-2010* (Harset: Bloodaxe, 2012), p. 60.

streets and scenes; memories that have been, however, gridded, machinised, systematised by some technocultural force.

What is mysterious, though, is why Ian Tyson would then sit on that poem for twenty years without doing anything with it. In one of the interviews with Cathy Courtney for the BL's sound archive series, National Life Stories: Artist's Lives, conducted after Courtney had produced *The Looking Book: a Pocket History of Circle Press* (London: Circle Press, 1996), Tyson confesses that he couldn't find 'any kind of direct visual connection with [the 'Roller' poem]', and had offered it to his son Matthew, but Matthew had baulked at working on a typographical project, so they had left it at that.[3] It was only when Fisher wrote them a letter (prompted by Derek Slade's updating of his 1987 bibliography for the 2000 *The Thing About Roy Fisher*) asking him whether he was planning to print it or not, that Tyson turned back to the poem and resurrected the forgotten Smokeless Zone project, but this time as a stand-alone print object.

Tyson still had difficulty, he tells Courtney, finding a 'visual corollary' to the poem, until he hit on a solution: he would find it in three dimensions: 'my visual contribution would be some sort of sculptural cover'. Matthew Tyson still did not want to work on the text, but Ron King had expressed an interest: King would generate the typographical side of the poem, working with his typesetter Karen Bleitz – so *Roller* shifted from Tetrad to Circle. Tyson remembers King saying 'we'll do it on the computer and we'll make a fairly cheap edition of it'. With Tyson and Bleitz communicating by fax, Tyson sending dummy text typed out on his electronic typewriter, Bleitz set up the whole project on her Mac, and the text was printed, in colour, on an Epson printer. Tyson had learnt from his own typesetters, Set Up, how typewritten texts could very quickly be visualised and redesigned on computer, and had appreciated the speed of the ways computer-savvy typesetters could work with grids; and the practice of John Christie, producing whole books from start to finish on

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[3] https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Art/021M-C0466X0063XX-0039V0

computers, had impressed him too, he tells Courtney. *Roller* is produced, as the Yale catalogue puts it, as:

> the first computer-generated book made at Circle Press designed for a text written in 1979, printed in Centaur on an Epson Stylus in three colours by Karen Bleitz. 35 signed copies in a concertina format – 22 pp – 14 x 17 cm on with black card ends and a fluted composition-board-slip-case.

The Tyson 'sculptural cover' is rather oddly noted here as a' fluted composition-board-slip-case' – it is much more easily recognizable as a black wooden version of a CD-case, with the fluted lines the only element that suggests the gridlines of the actual poem inside. You pull out the poem as you might a CD case from a box set, the black Zerkall card ends also grooved into seven slices. Open the book up, and the text inside is printed in concertina-format with thirteen folds – the concertina a format that had been a feature of Fisher's 1978 collaboration with King, *Scenes from the Alphabet.* Each page is divided into four columns, with two colours, black and red, the column lines a lime-green: Roy's *Cultures*-like fragments are arranged so that each column has two phrases in black, columns 1 and 4 on the same lines but set low, columns 2 and 3 higher, intercalated *vis à vis* the other pair. Two red phrases float on the page at the top left in the first column, and furthest down in the third. This patterning repeats for the whole poem, inviting either a reading that finds a logic for the placements and rubric-red lettering, or simply accepting the setting as part of 'computer-generated' form. What had been written as a response to print technology as machinic rolling out of urban materiality becomes, after the twenty-year wait, a grid-systematizing by information technology with its columns of ones and zeroes. The historical shift to the informational changes the meanings of the poem's text-objects. Karen Bleitz takes the typographical as imagined by Roy's roller-compositional machine-mind, and as faxed her by Tyson, and signals other kinds of grids and systems – she picked up to a reference to 'pale lime-green' in the

poem to colour the column-divisions, for instance. The informational redefines the mechanical, as her collaboration with Richard Price, *The Mechanical Word*, suggests. Price in a note to the collaboration, mentions *Roller*, suggesting that both *Roller* and *The Mechanical Word* have 'an industrial structure and finish'.[4]

One can get a sense of Tyson's way with design from notes he communicated about his setting of Jerome Rothenberg's *Sightings*:

> I used the grid to form the pulse or ground base of the images & as a structure for the typography. The colored squares were thematic relating to each part of the text but once having established it I improvised freely until I arrived at what I felt to be a satisfactory counterpoint of typographically correct text & page.[5]

Adapting this to *Roller*, one can say that the grid forms the pulse and ground base as structure for the typography: in the precise sense that the printer roller, as it prints the text, is imagined as performing four downward passes (downward because of the conventional movement of the eye); but as computer-generated it is printing left to right, the six text-lines as well as the three column lines. The notional printer-roller prints the columns, with a vertical pulse of red text–black text–black text | black text–black text | black text–black text–red text | black text–black text; while the computer has a visual horizontal rhythm that runs: red | | | : | black | black | : black | | | black : | black | black | : black | | | black : | | red |.

Fisher's poem is then being structured by the grid as a counterpoint to its isolated phrasal units, situating them in the page space as within a mechanical-informational form that alters the isolated textual meanings through controlled juxtapositioning and foregrounding of technological order and word-processing powers. The text-units themselves, however, have compositional imperatives that govern the shaping: the reader sees

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[4]   Richard   Price   on   Arc   Editions   on   his   hydrohotel   website   –
hydrohotel.net/ArcEditions1.pdf.
[5] Jerome Rothenberg on Ian Tyson, *jacket2*, September 2014 – homage written 2004 –
'Ian & me: A collaboration' – https://jacket2.org/commentary/ian-me-collaboration

that at the heart of each page, columns two and three, the phrases are identical – and then clocks the fact that the phrase-pairs to either side (columns one and four) also repeat across the page-fold. A longer rhythm is at work according to these text-repetitions – the repeated pairs form squares across two adjacent columns that are positioned either higher (two and four of the text-line grid) or lower (three and five). These alternate so the eye registers (if we open the concertina) squares flowing high-low-high-low etc.; with the red phrases also alternating every other column, high-low-high-low etc..

  To the text itself: if we take as representative a sample across two pages from late in the poem, reading down each column we get:

> [page-fold] easy feet / another's household / troubles fall away | candlewick / tight little stairs | candlewick / tight little stairs / pleasant duty | snuffle and sleep / brass screw thread [page-fold] candle smell / snuffle and sleep / brass screw thread | privation / slate grey disk | privation / slate grey disk / powdery hands | chicken skin / ritually resigned [page-fold]

This is the roller-text, and the text-fragments join together as memory-flashes of images seen, as phrases recalled, as dream-objects described, falling onto the text from a Birmingham of long ago, as the references to the candles and privation invite us to imagine. The pages watch an old woman, it seems: the last page's red lines will note 'too old already' and 'spread skirt'. The phrase-units are kept isolated by the grid and machine, but the repeats insist on the performance of memory as the pairs double up: with improvisation hinted at with the red texts, that herald a new page at the fold. As the phrases read together, they fall into rhythms more recognizable as poetry, or as the rhythm of memory-texts attentive to old age – much of *Roller* is in synch with Beckett's old woman memory plays, *Footfalls*, *Rockabye*, or anticipates *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The two-beat pulse set up by 'easy feet' alternates here and there with three-beat phrases ('troubles fall away', 'tight little stairs', 'brass screw thread'), gathering to

roughly a twenty-four beat cluster per page. The technology on display here is antique, the brass screw thread of the candle-holder, candle lighting up the images of her 'powdery hands', communicating through the old woman's senses to us across time and space, as 'candle smell' does the olfactory environment of the stranger's household.

The first page had hinted that the grid of columns and text-lines we are encountering might be mimicking a street-map: 'cloud city' and 'the town roofs'; and later we have 'oblique street view'. The most metapoetic phrase-pair speaks of 'black white red / old tyres rolling', bringing the printer roller and its reproduction of black and red text on white page space into relation with an aircraft ('backyard aircraft') printing its tyre-tracks on the yards and roads of old Birmingham. The aircraft 'dribbles oil', seems to have a 'revolving eye': the aircraft is the technological objective correlative to Fisher's returning imagination, printing off streets as it flies over the city, tracking the roadways as it taxies through the urban spaces. At the same time, text-phrases point to architecture, a 'tall ordinary house' and the interior spaces of 'another's household', as we have seen. The 4 x 6 grid of columns and text-lines, with the repeating text-squares, and alternating red-letter phrases, conjure at once an industrial structure of fabrication appropriate to the city (the tyre factory, Fort Dunlop of Dunlop Rubber, once the world's largest factory, was situated in Erdington), a street map that enables street-overview, and a house plan inviting the revolving eye of the returning snooper, spying on the Birmingham folk within. The spatial coordinating of the language does not prevent, as we have seen, a rival structuring to occur, the more sentimental envisioning of body and scene of the mind's eye remembering past time and city space.

The opening of the poem gives from the outset a rather brutal warning to the reader not to take the eye that returns/imagines/recalls too sentimentally: 'airy wire / cloud city [page-fold] one idiot eye / airy wire / cloud city'. The Birmingham being conjured may be a castle in Spain, a city imagined in the clouds, made of airy wires like a mock-up tricked-up for the movies; or it may be a city seen from the clouds, its wires of

communication imagined in the air of poetry. The eye that is seeing the city may be insane, with clouded judgement, head in the air; or it may take us back to the origin of 'idiot', the lay person, the simple, ordinary person, the city-dweller with their fancies. The journey back in time, though, is what makes the visions tough to call as realist, as true. The first two pages remember 'horse on nothing / drawing trees up', which crosses the starving horses at labour in the city before the combustion engine took over with a vision of a horse appearing in the middle of nothingness whilst trees are drawn up into the sky by the draughtsman Fisher-poet. What is being drawn up too, from the past, is old language: one page speaks of a 'loose jointed lady / marble top disc', and later we have 'slate grey disc', as we have seen. The 'lady' may be being imagined within a shop or kitchen where a revolving slate disc is set in the marble top; or, more likely once we know this, the 'lady' is the Birmingham term for a small roofing-slate, measuring, the OED tells us, approximately sixteen inches by eight inches': Swinney's *Birmingham and Stafford Chronicle* of 1791 is quoted: 'There is now on Sale […] a large Quantity of superfine Carnarvonshire Slates; consisting of Ton Slates, Patent Slates, Countess Slates, Ladies' Slates and Doubles'. The 'town roofs' of the first page may be supplying the fiction of the old lady through the ancient technology of the roof-slate and its technical language, providing its own gridwork, the 16x8 of the 'lady' and its tiling of the roofs counterpointing with the poem's own 6x4.

The roller of *Roller* then has two rival meanings, the tyre-tread of the rolling wheels of the aircraft providing the revolving eye with its cloud city views; the inked printer roller printing off street and scene and poem. But it may conjure too the technologies Tyson, Bleitz and King used to bring *Roller* to material being – Tyson's typewriter with its rollers holding the page; the roller holding the toner in the Epson printer. Or it may signal the rolling out of film celluloid, each of the four strips per page containing shots and stills from the cutting room floor – as Eddie Morgan implies when he wonders in his 2000 letter which B-movie we might be in. Or it might point to the rolling rhythm going high to low to high of the pair-

squares and red letter phrases, a long wave of text running along the concertina's rolling folds. The text being counterpointed by the computer-generated form has its own internal counterpointing of motif: city, denizen, antique technology, house, road, urban space scoped by the revolving eye of the city-as-*techne;* airy nothings, visions, flashes of memory ('her face / flashes late') dreamt by the old poet capturing what he glimpses in his mind's eye. Eddie Morgan, when he was sent the 'black book' that is *Roller*, commended Fisher for the surrealist technique used by the remembering eye: 'all those traces—all those places—all those Chirico arcades we flit through or stand in'. Morgan took the columns as a set of de Chirico arcades, eerie, dreamy, nearly empty of people, constructed from memory traces, or dream places, or both, conjoining the unconscious with the city-dweller's imagination and recall. Those columns summon, too, another conjoining – the fusion of the Auden group's technological 1930s envisioning with the iconography of the working-class, a Mass-Observational style: 'pylon foot / brick tea' is repeated on the very first page. This revolving eye[6] returns to the first decade of Fisher's life on earth and in the city, returning too to the styles, surrealist, Mass Obs and Popular Front, of the 1930s to really date this ultra-modern informational Circle Press object. Fisher circles back to his deep past (mischievously challenging Tyson's up-to-date modernism: 'hopefully look as if it has something to do with 1979 rather than the music hall'), back to his Birmingham traces in a dream of old technologies (the candles, slates, printing press rollers, and dilapidated aircraft) that is also a *techne* made of traces and places of the mind, rolling out the city maps and city scenes dreamt as much as remembered within the grids of the city's networks.

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[6] ''Will you never have done ... revolving it all ... In your poor mind?", the mother asks her daughter in Beckett's 1975 *Footfalls*.